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ABSTRACT

The task of providing the tools of basic literacy for all citizens is still unfinished in the United States, as well as on an international scale. No longer can the developed and underdeveloped worlds relate as mentor and learner; the United States has much to learn from the great work in literacy and basic education performed in lesser developed areas. Mass literacy is necessary for modern technology and modern nations; the quest for universal literacy is inextricably linked to such values as equality of social and economic opportunity, self-determination in the political sphere, and the development of a critical intellectual spirit. In addition to functional or basic literacy, there exists the concept of "social literacy," which recognizes that certain skills and capacities are necessary for one to become a part of society and to transcend one's own heritage and gain some sense of oneself as a citizen of the world. Beyond the transmission of technical information and insight, literacy has a purpose in expressing the interpretations of human experience. (DF)

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THE "FUNCTIONAL" AND "SOCIAL" USES OF LITERACY

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by

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I am honored to share in this meeting with those of you who are making contributions to the work of literacy education here in the United States and around the world. The ability to communicate, to understand and be understood, to use language to capture a conviction, express an emotion or clarify a concept is the most fundamental of human skills.

It is not inappropriate that a representative of the National Endowment for the Humanities should participate in these deliberations. We define the humanities today in terms of certain fields of knowledge -- history, philosophy, the study of language and culture. In the Middle Ages, however, the university curriculum in Western Europe was divided into several categories of knowledge and the term humanities referred specifically to those disciplines and skills related to human expression: grammar, logic and rhetoric. The term comes from a Latin term "humanitas" which means the mental cultivation befitting a man or a woman -- the human arts.

For citizens of the United States, literacy also has a political significance. One of our Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, two hundred years ago wrote "democracy demands an educated citizenry." He envisioned a community in which access

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to knowledge would be a right for all citizens rather than a privilege accorded to only a few. Extraordinary social, technological and demographic changes separate Jefferson's world from ours, but nothing has happened to loosen the bonds between literacy and democracy. Indeed, that tie today is as critical as it ever was.

It is significant and, I believe, a hopeful sign that we have acknowledged in the context of this conference that the task of providing the tools of basic literacy for all our citizens is still unfinished here in the United States as well as being a problem with international dimensions.

It is also significant that we acknowledge that we are no longer in a situation where a so-called "developed" world will relate to the so-called "under-developed" world simply as mentor and teacher. For today here in the United States we have much to learn from the remarkable strides that have been made in literacy and basic education by our brothers and sisters in the less industrialized parts of the world. We look for inspiration and instruction from the remarkable experiments in citizen education in Britain and Guinea-Bissau and in the Peoples' Republic of China as well as to the work of scholars and teachers here in our own land. And today we listen and learn from the voice of philosophers of education like Paulo Freire as well as to our own John Dewey and the British philosopher, Whitehead.

We have come to see ourselves, then, as collaborators with those of other nations, large and small -- collaborators in an unfinished task, students as well as teachers, learning as well as instructing.

Without mass literacy, neither modern technology nor modern nations could exist. Yet the idea of widespread literacy is still something of a historical novelty. As late as 1850 only about half of the adults in the advanced European countries could read and as late as the nineteenth century, the social value of universal literacy was still a subject of debate. In 1746, for instance, the Academy of Rouen debated the following question: "Is it advantageous or harmful to have peasants who know how to read and write?" Two decades later, in his essay on National Education the French Attorney General wrote that "Educators are pursuing a fatal policy. They are teaching people

to read and write who should have learned only to draw and to handle planes and files.... The good of society demands that the knowledge of the people should not exceed what is necessary for their occupation. Every man who sees further than his dull daily round, will never follow it out bravely and patiently." And in 1807 the president of the British Royal Society was arguing that teaching the poor to read and write would "impair their morals and happiness. It would teach them to despise their lot in life. It would enable them to read seditious pamphlets and ...books."

Here in the United States we live in a pluralistic nation where many of us look back upon grandfathers and great-grandfathers who fled from societies in which barriers of established privilege reduced opportunities for literacy and learning and came to settle a new nation in quest of such opportunities for all.

The quest for universal literacy is inextricably linked to certain values in the modern world: equality of social and economic opportunity; self-determination in the political sphere; and the development of the critical spirit in the realm of thought.

Many of your deliberations today have focused upon literacy in terms of "basic skills" and what we have come to call "functional literacy." I want, however, to say a few words about another kind of literacy. In addition to the kind or level of literacy that we call "functional" or "basic" we must also keep in mind the concept of "social" literacy.

Perhaps this is not the best term for what I have in mind. I am not referring to the tasks of writing invitations to tea or of composing dissertations on urban problems. (Although there is nothing wrong with writing invitations or studying urban problems!) What I am trying to express here is the sense in which these skills and capacities provide us with the opportunity to become a part of a society. And for those of us who live in various societies, to transcend our own national heritage and gain some sense of ourselves as citizens of the world.

All of us, even the simplest, humblest and most innocent, lead complex and often lonesome lives, lives that no one else ever sees. Some of the time no one else is even around, or everyone is too busy talking about something else. Or the important things that are happening even when other people are around and interested, happen invisibly inside us.

This lonesomeness is a part of the human condition. We seek to overcome it in many ways. We sing, dance and we draw pictures. But the most subtle, persuasive and all-encompassing way in which we get through to other people is with words, we talk and we listen.

Such activity is very important to the maintenance and expression of our humanity. When people are beside us or on the other end of a telephone wire, we feel less alone. We delight in talking to them and listening. But there are limitations to talking and listening. For one thing, there are many people with whom we will never have personal contact and others who in the past spoke as you and I speak, but whose voices are not with us today.

It is said that dead men and women tell no tales, but that is not quite the whole truch. Thanks to literacy and thought and human expression, we have records from the past. We can learn from the great thinkers who have gone before us. And so, in addition to the importance of "basic" and "functional" literacy which is necessary for every man and woman to live an adequate life, there are requisites of what I am here calling "social" literacy. Beyond our ability to read the directions on a box of cake mix or the instructions that tell us how to use a plow are other opportunities that literacy provides. The opportunity to hear what other people have had on their minds in the past about the private and most human aspects of their lives. To hear that past, we have to read it and by the same token, written expression allows us to insure that our children and our children's children may know what is on our minds about the inner and private and most human aspects of our own lives.

The purpose of literacy is to express and transmit more than technical information and insight.

Take the example of Nate Shaw, the former slave and tenant farmer who served a term in prison for participating in union organizing. Nate Shaw was discovered when he was 84 years old in Tuskegee, Alabama by Theodore Rosengarten. A few years ago, Rosengarten took down with a tape recorder Nate Shaw's remarkable memories and reflections upon his life. First the tape recording and then the book became a marvelous instrument for releasing

what was locked up inside this man who was not able to read or write. His deep feelings of compassion, of a sense of justice and an appreciation of life are expressed in remarkable passages from the book:

"I never tried to beat nobody out of nothin' since I've been in the world, never has, but I understands that there's a whole class of people tries to beat the other class of people out of what they has. I've had it put on me; I've seen it put on others with these eyes. Oh, it's plain! If every man thoroughly got his rights, there wouldn't be so many rich people in the world. I spied that a long time ago. Oh, it's desperately wrong! I found cut all of that because they tried to take, I don't know what all away from me....

"Somebody got to stand up. If I'm sworn to stand up for all the poor colored farmers and poor white farmers, if they take a notion to join, I've got to do it.

"If you don't like what I've done, then you are against the man I am today. I ain't going to take no backwater about it. If you don't like me for the way I have lived, go on off into the woods and bushes and shut your mouth and let me go for what I'm worth and if I come out of my scraps, all right. If I don't come out, don't let it worry you, this is me and for God's sake, don't come messin' with me. I'd fight this morning for my rights. I'd do it for other folks' rights if they'll push along.

"How many people is it today, that needs and requires to carry out this movement? How many is it knows just what it's goin' to take? It's taken untold time and more time and it'll take more before it's finished.... The unacknowledged ones... that's livin' here in this country, they're gonna win." *

*<u>All God's Dangers</u>, The life of Nate Shaw, Avon Books, New York, 1974.

Nate Shaw may have been illiterate but his testimony was not lost thanks to Theodore Rosengarten, and it reminds us to this day of how deep and sensitive and rich the human spirit can be.

It is estimated that there are 3 billion people in the world today. Everyone of them has observations, reflections, emotions and intuitions on his or her mind. If we live today, as someone said, in a "global village" then getting to know what other people have on their minds and to know and trust each other and to sense our relationships with those whom we may never see but with whom we share a common globe, is of the utmost importance. To do this, every one of the 3 billion of us must learn something of what the other 299,999,999 have to say or feel. But this is a mind-boggling thought for we can not all speak to each other and we cannot possibly all listen to each other. Yet there can be writing, there can be the reading of messages transmitted in writing.

As widely and as differently as the many people that populate the earth today at the level of our humanity, there are, I believe, not 3 billion messages to translate but only one fundamental message, "What are we to make of the human experience?"

The expressions of that message are infinitely varied, overwhelmingly complex, unfathomably deep -- which is to say they are human.

But there is only one message and the fact that it is one message is why Shakespeare plays so well in Tokyo and Rio and why the tale of Ginji reads so well in Moscow and London -- and why Sophocles and Euripides and Plato go over so well everywhere: in Harlem and Hunts Point, in Walla Walla and Kankakee, in Tobasco and Perth, in Mwanca, Omsk and Zaragoza.

You will note that I have slipped from talking about the theme of this conference which you have been so intensely and rightly concerned with today, basic skills and functional literacy, to a topic with which I am intensely and, I believe, rightly concerned. Perhaps I made the transition to avoid revealing the little I understand about what all of you know so well. But I did it also to try to illustrate a fundamental aspect of human literacy to which I referred at the beginning of these remarks.

There is an advertisement which is running lately in some of our American newspapers and magazines and on our subways and buses. It is an ad for the United Negro College Fund and it asks for contributions to those colleges. The ad has a picture of a young man sitting alone in a room with a single sentence. It says, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

I believe that ad poignantly expresses for all 3 billion of those of us who inhabit the earth, an emerging and fundamental conviction -- any one of our 3 billion minds is a terrible thing to waste -- and that, from my point of view, is what the quest for universal literacy is all about.